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Steve Perez / The Detroit News

Michael Callahan, right, with wife Susan, are with five of their eight adopted children, Ramaul, left, Jonathan, Chiara, Trevon and Treana.

## Family grows with adoption of older kids

Rosemary Dorr / Special to The Detroit News

As the house that Michael and Susan Callahan built grew and grew -- so did their family.

The kitchen was first to be enlarged in 1992 after the Callahans of Belleville adopted Emmanuel, 5, and Jonathan, 4. Next, they adopted Treana, 6, and Trevon, 6, in 1998, and the Callahan house expanded to include a bathroom, reading room, an office for Susan and a study area for the children.

The same day that the Callahans paid off the builder in 2001 for that addition, an adoption agency called them about Ramaul, 10.

"I never really had much concern about adopting (older children)," Susan Callahan says. "Maybe because we weren't a traditional family. And the chances of children to get a

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home as they get older are virtually nonexistent. Even for children approaching 3 or 4, their chances of being adopted become slim."

Next, the two-car garage, which didn't have any room for cars, was converted into an exercise room, game space and another bathroom after Sonja, 17, and her brother Dejuan, 16, joined the family in 2003.

"We figured with eight teenagers, we needed bathrooms," says Susan Callahan. "It was a tri-level house, but you wouldn't recognize it now. It's almost double the size."

"Our food bill is bigger than our house payment," chuckles Michael Callahan.

When the Callahans married in June 1991, Susan had three children from a previous marriage and a baby girl, Chiara, 11 months old, whom she had adopted four months before the marriage.

"I had always wanted more children, and ever since my three children were little, they wanted me to adopt.

"Kim, Maribeth and Jarrod took every opportunity they got to read, study and write about children who needed homes. One of Kim's school papers on drug babies touched me so much - I can't remember exactly what she wrote -- that in my final year in college, I applied to adopt and was introduced to Chiara."

Michael Callahan says, "We never considered foreign adoptions. We had so many children right here."

In Michigan, there are more than 4,000 children who need permanent families. While there is no shortage of adoptive homes for healthy infants, there is a long waiting list of children who are older than 5, or part of a sibling group, or of a racial minority or with emotional, intellectual or physical impairments.

In 1992, taking that next step, Michael and Susan Callahan went to the Kinship Adoption Festival. "Two little boys walked up to us," Michael Callahan recalls. One said, 'My name is Emmanuel, I'm 4 and this is my brother Jonathan and he's 3 and we can be adopted.'

"Where can I sign up?" was my reaction," he said.

The Callahans adopted the brothers that year. Emmanuel, now 18, is a 2006 graduate from Belleville High School and a freshman at the University of Michigan. Jonathan, 17, a senior and "avid soccer fan," wants to be an electrical engineer or something tied in with computers.

"I feel that I've been given a lot of opportunities," Jonathan says.

Yet, Susan Callahan cautions, "No matter the children's background, you can't disrespect their birth family. Every night before I go to sleep, I thank their mothers for giving them life."

She emphasizes, "It is important to the children to know that their biological family, foster family and 'forever' family all have roles in their lives."

Susan Callahan outlines the philosophy that underlies their parenting.


"My husband and I are totally convinced that nurture is the biggest part" (in raising well-adjusted children)," she says. "Nature has a place, but nurture trumps nature in our view. We have high expectations of the children, yet appropriate. We believe children want to respond. Kids are who they are because of the efforts they make themselves."

*Rosemary Dorr is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.*

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